

Unit Nine: Emergence of Buddhist Sects

The time period amounting to one and a half centuries after the second Buddhist councils, is remarkable in the history of Buddhist dispensation as it records the highest number of divisions occurred within the community of Sangha during that period. Chinese version of Vasumitra's treaties on eighteen sects of Buddhism¹ and Tibetan versions of Bhavya's and Vinitadava's texts on the eighteen Buddhist schools² confirmed that there were eighteen Buddhist sects or schools arisen out of the Sangha due to different reasons within this particular period of time. Though the number was not given, Kathāvatthu, one of the Theravada Abhidhamma treaties and its commentary too gave us a considerable amount of different view points held by most of the Buddhist sects. Strangely enough, though the above mentioned literary sources are unanimous with the number of the sects, they differ from their lists of the names of the sects. Different names appeared in those lists give rise to the confusion as to whether there were more than eighteen sects or some sects were known in several names.

However, scholars who have done careful examination on the various lists of the Buddhist schools appeared in different sources generally agree to accept eighteen Buddhist sects after considering the overlapping names given in those sources.

Before the second Buddhist council, for about hundred years after the Buddha's passing away, Buddhist monastic Order was able to exist as a united community without having a considerable split among its members. As we had already known that the second Buddhist council was held as a resort to settle the issues that arise due to the acceptance of ten unlawful factors by the Vajjiputtaka monks. The verdict given on the issue by the monks who attended the council was not acceptable to the Vajjiputtakās. As a result, they formed a section of monks against the monks who were in favor of the second council and are reported to have conducted a separate council of their own with the participation of ten thousands of their supporters including monks and the lay devotees. Emergence of two groups of monks in this way, records the first division within the members of the Sangha who were so far lived as undivided unitary community.

Newly formed section of monks came to be known as Mahasangha due to the fact that their council was convened with the majority of the Sangha (mahāsaṅgha). To distinguish the monks of the other section, they were known as Theras (sthaviras). Tradition of the Mahā-saṅgha later came to be known as Maha-saṅghiya or Maha-saṅghika while that of the Therās as Theriya or Theravada. These two main sects of the Sangha were gradually developed into further sects and sub-sects due to various reasons. According to traditional view there were eighteen sects including two main sects at the time of third Buddhist council which was held after the three centuries of the Buddha's passing away.

Out of the eighteen sects, as scholars (from Pali sources) generally accepted, Theriyās gave rise to following sects and sub-sects amounting to eleven in number:

Mahisāsaka, Dharmaguptika, Haimavatika, Sarvāstivāda, Kāśyapiya, Sautrāntika or Sankrāntivāda, Vātsīputriya, Dharmottariya, Bhadrāyānika, Channāgarika and Sammitiya.

¹. Samayabhedoparacanacakra of Vinitadeva

². Nikayabhedavibhanga of Vinitadeva.

The following five sects are enumerated as the offshoots of Mahasanghikas:

Ekavyavahārika, Kaukkulika or Gokulika, Bahusrutiya, Prajnaptivāda and Lokottaravāda.,

These sects belonging to the two main groups of the monks are considered as existed in India during the time of the third Buddhist council. Some of the schools mentioned in the literary sources had their origin after the third century B.C. Schools such as Pūva-sailika, Aparā-sailika, Rājagirikā and Siddhārthika were counted as later than the above mentioned sects in their origin. However it should be noted here that literary sources are not unanimous in their opinions with regard to the origin and the root sect or the original sect of Haimavatikās. According to Sri Lankan chronicles this should be placed among the schools appeared some time after the third council. Vasumitra is of the opinion that the Staviravāda had changed its name into Haimavata. Bhavya and Vinitadeva held the view that it is a sub-sect of Mahā sanghikās.

Reasons for the divisions within the Order

As far as monastic Order is concerned, its unity and purity were the main interests of the Buddha. The Buddha was aware of the fact that not only the accomplishment of personal religious achievements of the members of the Order but also the existence of his message for the wellbeing of many solely depends on the unity and the purity of the monks. It is evident from both the Dhamma and the Vinaya that the Buddha has taken every possible step to safeguard the unity and purity of the Sangha during his life time.

In the Bahuvedaniya sutta, the Buddha has instructed to monks the way how to behave in order to avoid possible dissensions and disputes regarding his teaching. He says that as far as his teaching is concerned, one should respect and endorse another's views if they conform to the proper canon³. In the Maha-parinibbana-sutta, Buddha introduced seven factors to be practiced by the monks for the well-being and long life of their community.⁴

In the Vinaya, most of the rituals and observances like Uposatha, Vassāna and Pavāraṇa recommended for the monks were mainly intended to ensure the unity and the purity among themselves. In order to resolve the internal conflicts of the monks, seven methods (Satta adhikarāna-samatha) were introduced by the Buddha. Upholder of the wrong views regarding Dhamma-vinaya without giving them up is declared to be treated as guilty of Sanghādisesa offence⁵. Knowing the prevailing reluctance among some monks of the Order to abide by the minor rules, the Buddha was liberal enough to express his willingness to allow the monks to abolish them if they would like to do so⁶. It is certain that the Buddha has taken this decision anticipating the possible dissensions within the monks over the minor rules.

In spite of the precautionary steps taken by the Buddha against the possible splits among the members of the Order, it seems that there were some disruptive forces at work within the Order. Both Sutta and Vinaya Pitakas record that there were protests raised by some rebellious monks against the disciplinary measures adopted by the Buddha. There are instances in the

³. Bahuvedaniya Sutta, M.1.398

⁴. See Satta-aparihāṇiya Dhamma, D.111. Mahāparinibbana-sutta.

⁵. Sanghādisesa section of the Pārājika-pāli

⁶. D. Mahā-Parinibbāna-sutta.

discourses where some monks are reported to be arrogant, militant and intolerant of the advice of the Buddha⁷. It is reported that a monk named Kassapagotta of Pankadha protested at the discourse of the Buddha when he was dealing with monastic discipline⁸. Once, the Buddha clearly stated that there are certain monks who refuse to obey his advice and express their displeasure not only at him but also at the other good disciples who lead a well disciplined life⁹.

When we examine the factors that led to the dissensions among the members of the Order after the passing away of the Buddha, it seems that the most notable one was none other than the different views held by the monks over the contents of their disciplinary code. There was a tendency even during the time of the Buddha as stated above, among some monks to go against the restriction of their freedom and liberty by adding many more rules to the code of discipline. It should be emphasized here that no even a single evident can be found either in Vinaya or Dhamma to show that monks protested against the major rules. Their protest was merely to go against the rules which they thought to be minor rules (*Khuddhānukhuddakāni sikkhāpadāni*). The monks who were considered as the rebellions are reported to have protested against the recitation of such rules at the recital of Patimokkha challenging their usefulness. Such rules, according to them stand only for doubtfulness, weariness and annoyance (*Kim pani'mehi khuddānukhuddakāni sikkhāpadāni udditthehi. Yāvadeva kukkuccāya vihesāya vilekhāya samvattaanti*)¹⁰.

Almost all the disruptive forces appeared during the time of the Buddha are seemed to be rooted on the matter of disciplinary code. Dispute and quarrel between the two groups of Dhammadharas and Vinayadharas at Kosambi arose because of the very light offence which comes under lesser and minor rules¹¹. Disagreement between the Buddha and Devatatta which caused a clear dissention (Sanghabheda) among the Sangha was also based on the matter of disciplinary rules¹². The words of Subhadda who is reported to have expressed his joy on the passing away of the Buddha is undoubtedly refer to his displeasure over the vinaya rules promulgated by the Buddha¹³. Thera Purāna who did not give his consent to the proceedings of the first council¹⁴ reported to have insisted on the incorporation of some additional rule into the Vinaya¹⁵.

The Mahāsaṅghikās were separated from Theriyās after the second council on the basis of ten factors which were considered to be unlawful according to the accepted disciplinary code by the Theriyās. All these cases point to the fact that disciplinary code of the monks was a controversial matter which paved the way to arise different opinions even during the life time of the Buddha.

Apart from the disciplinary matters, another probable cause for the dissensions in the Sangha was the absence of the supreme head who could lead the entire community of Sangha after the demise of the Buddha. There was no question with regard to the leadership during the life time

⁷ "Dubbacā kho etarahi Bhikkhū dovaccassakaranehi dhammehi samannāgatā akkhamā appadakkhinaggāhino anusāsanim". S. II. 204, see also M. I. 437; A. I. 230, 236.

⁸ A. I. 236

⁹ M. I. 449

¹⁰ Vin. IV. 143.

¹¹ Mahā vagga, Kosambakkhandaka

¹² Cūla-vagga vii. 3

¹³ Ibid. Pancaāsattikkhandaka

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nalinaksha Dutt, Buddhist Sects in India. P.39, 122.

of the Buddha as from the very beginning of his career the Buddha was accepted as the leader of all the disciples who took to the monastic life. In the Bhayabherava-sutta, it seems that the Buddha himself admitted the fact that his disciples regard him as their leader when it was revealed by the Brahmin Jānussoni (*Bhavam tesam gotamo **pubbangamo**... bho ca pana gotamassa sā janatā ditthānugatim āpajjantiti. **Evametam brāhmaṇa evametam brāhmaṇa.***)¹⁶. Whenever there was a question relating either to Dhamma or Vinaya in the mind of disciples or any disagreement among the Sangha, the personal interference of the Buddha as their master was quite enough to resolve such things in many cases, without letting them to be big issues. The only recorded instance among such cases was the dispute between Dhammadharās and Vinayadharās at Kosambi in which the intervention of the Buddha was a failure. Devadatta's case can not be attributed to a disagreement among the monks as it was originated purely on the basis of personal bias.

However it is evident; as Prof. Jotiya Dhirasekera pointed out the Buddha never showed desire to exercise too much his personal control over the Sangha either by himself or through his nominees¹⁷. It seems that he had the confidence on his Dhamma and Vinaya as a driving force which can direct the sangha to the desired end on their matters. This may be the reason why the Buddha did not appoint a successor to his position and declared Dhamma and Vinaya to be the master of the Sangha after his demise¹⁸. Ven. Ananda's answer to the question of Brahmin Wasskāra as to whether monastic community can exist without guidance on the death of master who appointed no successor clearly reveals the way how the Dhamma which embodies the spirit of the Buddha's teaching which Ananda claims to be their leader (*Na kho mayam brāhmaṇa appatisaranā Sappatisaranā mayam Brāhmaṇa dhammapatisaranā*). It could lead them both in the proper care of the monastic community and the spiritual welfare of its members¹⁹.

Dhamma and the Vinaya can be the master as long as monks are resort to behave in accordance with it. But there were some monks as pointed out earlier, who sought to have a liberal attitude towards the Vinaya. It is no doubt that the questions arising in the Order because of such monks who act according to their personal bias can not be prevented even by the interference of Dhamma Vinaya. In such cases if there was a supreme leader representing the Buddha after his demise, he could have taken the decision to the satisfaction of all. It is quite obvious, that the first schism could not have happened if there was a supreme leader for the Order.

However, it should be emphasized here, that there is not even a single evidence to show that any group of monks was deviated from its mother group on the basis of the main teaching of the Dhamma. It is true that many of the Buddhist schools present their own interpretations to the teachings of the Dhamma; but, any school does not reject any part of the Dhamma presented by the Buddha. According to the Buddha's estimation, disputes over disciplinary matters (*ajjhācāre vā adhipātīmokkhe vā*) are comparatively trifles than that of teaching of the religious life (*magge vā patipadaya vā*)²⁰. Though there appeared many reasons for the dissension among the Order, strangely enough, the main teachings of the Dhamma such as Paticca-samuppāda, nibbāna, kamma, catu-sacca ariya-atthangikamagga, bodhipakkhiya-dhamma

¹⁶ M. 1. 16

¹⁷ Jotiya Dhirasekera, Buddhist Monastic Discipline. P.128.

¹⁸ "Yo mayā dhammo ca vinayo ca desito paññatto so vo mamaccayena satthā: D. 11. 154

¹⁹ "Tasmin ca Brāhmaṇa hoti bhikkhussa āpatti hoti vitikkamo tam mayam **yathā dhammam yathā sattham** karema. **Na kira no bhavanto kārenti Dhammo no kāreti** ti" Gopakamoggallana su tta, D.111. 10

²⁰ M. 11. 245

accepted as the teachings of the Buddha by common Sangha before their first strife never became a subject matter for disputes in the eighteen schools which come under our consideration. None of these schools came to emerge as against the main teachings of the Buddha.

Another probable cause for the dissensions of the Sangha as suggested by Nalinaksha Dutt in his *Buddhist Sects in India* is grouping around noted teachers²¹. When we examine the peculiar teachings of the Buddhist sects it seems that some of the sects have been originated without much doctrinal differences with other sects. Those sects, no doubt appeared as separate groups merely because of the fact that members of each group rallied round their leading monks who expressed some different opinions as against to the original sect to which they formally belonged. Some times, this grouping under a famous teacher became strengthen when the group was geographically away from its original sect. When the members of a particular sect are spread out over the territory of the area where the sect is established, it is natural that they incline to form a separate group of their own under their local leader. Gradually in the course of time this group arises as a different sect having their own peculiarities distinct from the original sect.

The practice of grouping around a noted teacher of the monks can be seen even during the life time of the Buddha. Some leading disciples of the Buddha like Sariputta, Moggallāna, Maha Kassapa are reported to have had large crowd of monks as their followers. Once, Venerable Sāriputta and Moggallāna accompanied with five hundred monks each respectively are said to have paid a visit to the Buddha.²² Episode of the Kosambiya monks who quarreled on account of lesser disciplinary matter informs us that two leading monks who are said to be Dhamma-dhara and Vinaya-dhara respectively were supported by their many followers over the matter.²³ Elder Mahā Kassapa was informed by an ascetic the news of the passing away of the Buddha when he was coming towards Kusinārā with five hundred monks.²⁴ Elder Purāṇa also reported to have arrived at Veluvana monastery in Rājagaha with five hundred monks shortly after the proceeding of the first council was over²⁵. It is no doubt that the same situation of the monks continues to exist even after the demise of the Buddha.

Origin of the sects such as Kāshyapiya, Vātsīputriya, Dharmottariya and Bahusrutiya which are supposed to be arisen before the third council and Siddhārthika which belongs to 3rd or 4th century AD can be attributed to the reason of grouping under the noted teacher for each name reminds us the leadership of a person by his name or by his position. Sects like Haimavatika, Rājagirika and Andhaka may have arisen due to the geographical reasons as their names refer to the names of certain geographical areas.

Another noteworthy factor that led to the emergence of divisions among the members of the sangha is the freedom for further elaboration or interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha did not seek to have a monopoly over his teaching. It was open for the able disciples for its clarification, elaboration, exploration and interpretation in the way that it accord with the essence of the teaching. It needs not be repeated as in the same way as a holy

²¹ Nalinaksha Dutt, *Buddhist sects in India*, p.43

²² Cātuma-sutta, M. 1. p. 457

²³ . Mā vagga.x., M.Kosambi-sutta.

²⁴ . Cullavagga-Pāli, (Vinaya Pitaka, vol. 11. PTS), p.284-5

²⁵ . Ibid Pancasatikkhanda

hymn or a sacred mantra. It is recorded in the nikāyās that not only the monks, but also the nuns and the laymen who were experts on elucidation and elaboration of the teaching were highly esteemed and honoured by the Buddha placing them on the high positions according to their skills.²⁶ Elder Mahā-kaccāna and Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā were promoted to the highest position among the monks and nuns respectively as they have the ability of analyzing in details what is said in brief by the Buddha.²⁷ Elder Kumāra-kassapa was given the highest position among those who express the Dhamma nicely.²⁸

The Buddha himself presented his teaching in different ways. In many places in the discourses the Buddha openly expressed that he presents his teachings in many ways, (pariyāya-desito kho ayam Ānanda mayā dhammo)²⁹ from many perspectives (aneka-pariyāyena). There was no restriction from the master to the disciples for following the method of explaining the dhamma in different way for the dhamma, as the Buddha says "the more one elaborates it, the more it shines" (*vivato virucat*)³⁰. On the other hand there was another important reason which required further clarification of the Dhamma. A distinction has been drawn in the pāli discourses between two types of statements namely nitattha-desanā and neyyattha-desanā.³¹ These two types of statements respectively refer to the statements whose meanings are already drawn out and the statements whose meanings have to be drawn out. The former type of statements was made by the Buddha in conformity with the conventional usage of the language. Therefore, those statements do not require further clarifications. Quite contrary to the former, the later types of statements which contain mostly the doctrinal points were presented by the Buddha making use of technical terms. They were open to further clarifications and elaboration. The requirement of the clarification and the freedom given by the Buddha to his disciples for further clarification of the dhamma seem to be one of the probable causes to appear different interpretations of the Dhamma and to emerge consequently some Buddhist sects on the basis of different view points of the Dhamma.

²⁶ . See Etadagga-pāli, Anguttara-nikāya

²⁷ . Ibid.

²⁸ . Ibid

²⁹ M. Bahu-vedniya-sutta.

³⁰ . Anguttaranikāya, Tikanipāta.

³¹ Anguttara 1. 60 (PTS)